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### Fleeting

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
School for American Crafts

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy of the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Fleeting

Alysia Grummert

September 2011

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my warmest gratitude to those who have generously given their time by encouraging, questioning, and criticizing throughout this memorable experience. I would like to thank Rick Hirsch, Liz Howe, Heidi Nickisher, Michael Amy, Maria Fera, and the late Kevin Mulhany for their dedication and especially for their honesty. I also extend my deepest appreciation to my family for their constant support and unconditional love. I thank my friends who reshape and enrich my life in countless ways.

## ABSTRACT

*Fleeting*, is a wall installation composed of individual slabs of porcelain inspired by the forms of the foliage that grew on the farm where I was raised. The seemingly wind-blown elements of this work are lightly textured and blushed with muted tints of color. This work celebrates a quiet, fragile beauty through the use of delicate, rhythmic forms. Some of the forms appear to take flight as they emerge from the wall. The mood of this piece expresses a season moving on. The arrangement of this wall piece captures a sense of migration as the eye is directed to follow in a single, graceful sweep. Essentially, this is a metaphor for passing moments.

## INTRODUCTION

My reason for pursuing graduate studies was to develop and strengthen my ideas and push myself into new ways of approaching my work. I wanted to solidify my purpose for creating art, advance my knowledge of the history of ceramics, and discuss contemporary issues within my field. I was confident in my technical ability and in my passion for working with clay. However, my greatest desire was to increase the clarity with which I communicate my thoughts about my art. Establishing myself as an artist is a continuous process and I needed a foundation from which to build.

In 2007, after leaving my family's farm the summer before graduate school, I experienced a renewed appreciation for the place and profession that had carried and sustained my family for so many generations. The 500-acre farm is located in the southeastern region of Nebraska, approximately sixty miles south of the state's capital, Lincoln. For five generations my family has grown corn, soybeans, sorghum, wheat, and alfalfa, which are used for feeding livestock. At an early age I started helping my father in the fields, preparing the soil, assembling the irrigation systems, as well as carrying out various other chores that needed to be done around the farm. The vivid image of my father coming home late each night from the fields covered from head to toe in dirt, his arms and hands tanned by the sun, is still clear in my mind. I admired his devotion to the land as well as his discipline

for working tirelessly in solitude. I know that my respect and admiration for his work influenced my decision to pursue ceramics as a career. There is something about having my hands in the clay that reminds me of home. Just as clay immediately reacts to the slightest change in its environment or with the subtlest movement of touch, so too does the soil. The smell from the fields signal rain is approaching even before the first drop has fallen.

Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely.

-Henry David Thoreau<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau writes that farming was once regarded as a spiritual experience, tied to every aspect of life. He romanticizes the origins of agriculture, to express his displeasure with how farming has evolved into a competitive business. Having experienced life on the farm and observed my father's struggle to thrive and survive in the markets, I see validity in Thoreau's comments. His thoughts about modern farming describes how even the purest pursuit can be corrupted for profit.

I believe that it is in the garden that the sacred art of growing plants still lives. The field was my father's domain, while the vegetable garden and multiple flowerbeds that were positioned on the property were considered my mother's realm. Working in the field was hard labor, a necessity, while the flower garden offered a reward for the senses. The stimulation of colors, scents, and tastes were



alluring and there were always many flower arrangements placed around the house as well as piles of fresh vegetables on the kitchen table. Every weekend my mother and I would visit my grandmother with a fresh bouquet for her own home. The giving and receiving of flowers and vegetables is how we expressed and accepted love within my family. The poet and novelist, Alice Walker conveyed this description so precisely about her mother and the garden:

I noticed that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible -except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty. Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me . . . -Alice Walker<sup>2</sup>

During my first year of graduate school at RIT, having a strong connection to the making of functional objects, I created vessels inspired by and intended for



**Figure 1 Flower Brick, earthenware 2007**

flowers. The flower brick was one of specific interest in which I could showcase precious short-lived specimens of the garden. Historically, flower bricks emerged in the eighteenth century as extravagant centerpieces for large bundles of flowers. These vessels were brick-shaped with multiple openings for individual flower stems. I found the idea and

history of the flower brick exciting in its grandiose presentation. The flower brick was a vessel in which I had elaborate options for arranging flora. In my mind, it was a way of organizing and designing a small part of the world.

The flower bricks I continued to construct became intricately focused on the imitation of botanical forms rather than simply showcasing the flowers themselves. The vessels were beginning to compete with the flowers they were meant to display. My initial analysis throughout the making of this work was that the simpler the vessel the more successful the overall arrangement. I found this to be a recurring challenge in creating vessels for containing flowers. I think this work had something further to explore yet I needed to abandon the idea for the time being. I decided to free the forms from the vessel and focus my energy solely on the botanical pieces themselves.

The foliage from my home informed my visual sensibilities for the objects I constructed and sketched. I wanted to cultivate my own interpretation of a particular place I was no longer physically in but still quite intimately connected to.



**Figure 2** Detail of my father's field, 2009

As I constructed the pieces in my studio, I thought about the labor of my father in the fields. I thought about how the seasons are experienced differently when living on a farm. I was frequently amazed

at the rapid pace of the summer months; how the farmers instinctively go into production mode. In just a few brief weeks seeds are planted, attentively cared for and nurtured, followed by harvesting of the grain. As one cycle comes to a close, the preparations for the next season are already in motion. My mode of operation in the studio carries a similar rhythm.

## INFLUENCES

The work I submitted for my thesis project was greatly influenced by the research I gathered over the course of previous years. Having recently worked on the flower bricks, I continued to explore the idea of representing nature as art. I recalled a slide lecture I saw during my first year of graduate school by Michael



**Figure 3 Crystal Sphere, Michael Rogers, 1993**

Rogers, a professor in the School for American Crafts at Rochester Institute of Technology. As he discussed the history of his work, a particular glass vessel he had made while living in Tokyo, Japan struck me.

In the vessel was a wilted, decaying lotus branch. I was moved by the elegant message of time passing within this piece. The Crystal Sphere combined with the depleted lotus leaf represented a perfect harmony between two contrasting materials. One can almost feel the cold, slick, unyielding presence of the man-made vessel matched with the frail, parched lotus disintegrating under the softest touch. The lotus leaf and the vessel are completed by each other. I found this work to be extremely poetic as nature transformed, time withered in an open and revelatory display. This piece acknowledged a state of being endemic to all living things yet so rarely presented as beauty.

Plants and flowers are valuable to me not only for their romantic symbolism but also for their recurrent metamorphoses, in a constant state of change. The seemingly dead flower bulbs that hang all winter from the dim cellar emerge into warm spring light for a spectacular showing only to return back to its shelter to complete the cycle once again. The floral arrangements I display on my kitchen table become for me an allegory of time. The inevitable fate that all living things share is brought to attention in their relatively brief presence. In a matter of days, the vibrant blossoms begin to fade and the petals soon fall. Each change represents a time frame, becoming a symbolic narrative in time. These sprays of blossoms constantly reform their space and uniquely inform my senses.

Early in the first stages of research, I explored various historical gardens and the significance to their particular cultures. I found the organization of these spaces or lack thereof, as well as the contents of these gardens, indicative to that given place. As I read about these spaces, some of which now only exist through written text, I was taken with how gardens communicate the philosophy and values of the society that produced them. For example, the ancient Hanging Gardens of Babylon were described as being created by King Nebuchadnezzar as a gift to his wife, Amytis. She was homesick and longed for the lush environment that surrounded her while growing up in Persia. The garden represented "home" and this was Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to bring a sense of comfort and familiarity to Amytis.

We all experience what the essence of "home" is and how we carry it with us from day to day. For some it is food, for others it may be a piece of jewelry or a photograph. For me, it is the garden, not the actual place, but its evocation, which impassions my life and work. As I continued reading about historical gardens, I also discovered contemporary ones as well.

I became enormously inspired by the writings of Robert Irwin. His vision and design for the Central Garden at the Getty Center in Los Angeles is such a unique interpretation of the garden as sculpture. His imagination for the space is brought into being for all to experience year after year. Irwin saw it as a continuous, ever changing place, full of cycles opening and closing, beginning and ending. He embraced his impulse to free the garden of hackneyed control and valued its constant transformation. When asked about what he saw for the space, he commented:

I will allow the garden to obliterate the boundaries, to ignore all the geometry and go for complete exuberance, which may be the one critical difference between this and other ideas about gardening, say a French garden, where the boundaries are held at all times, or a Zen garden, which is just in a sense and series of staging events. So it's none of those, though it partakes of all of them. –Robert Irwin<sup>3</sup>

I appreciated how Irwin created unique and original botanical configurations that integrated his own vision of the garden. He even imported deciduous trees to contrast with the indigenous perennial varieties to form the

environment. The changing seasons are a necessary component for the trees' transformation, which become relevant elements within the space. Irwin describes a feeling of melancholy during the dormant months, which he values. These months are a time for rest and



**Figure 4 Central Garden Getty Center, Los Angeles, Robert Irwin, 1997**

preparation before the explosion of color brought by spring. In the Central Garden (Figure 4), Irwin designed a row of trees to be trimmed from the inside out, thereby creating a window for light to filter through. The trees are framed as if they were paintings. As day progresses, and the light and shadows shift within the tree changing its overall appearance.

While reading Irwin's philosophy, I was also looking at a group of artists represented by the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Japan, whose "art is a direct response to nature, natural materials -wood, metals, minerals, fibers and stone- and the natural process of growth and decay."<sup>4</sup> The ideas of these artists were dependent upon the material and, as a result, the material becomes very much a part of the content. The artists worked with found materials from nature, which have been traditionally used in the making of crafts for thousands of years. The materials held a deep-rooted tradition and therefore communicated a

sense of familiarity that is universally understood. The material itself is a connection to the objects and people of the past, carried into the present. Moreover, these current artists used the materials in completely non-traditional ways, removing the utilitarian aspect of the object. For that very reason the work carried an alluring element of mystery. For example, one of the artists, Emiko Tokushige uses palm leaves, husks, and bark as her material for expression. She explains:

I want to leave more of the expression up to the material itself. . . I have to take it into my hands, but I am not certain to what extent I should do this. I don't want to kill the material. . . this struggle itself is enjoyable and interesting to me. It is this struggle that drives me in the creation of the work. –Emiko Tokushige<sup>5</sup>

The message of these artists through the material are directly linked to the awareness, process and transformation of nature. The artists guided the material



**Figure 5** Untitled, Emiko Tokushige, palm fiber, 1988

rather than trying to control it. In effect, the work coaxes the attention of the viewer rather than demanding it. The viewer recognizes that the work's existence is limited in time and requires full presence at that very moment.



A particular installation created by, Jeanne Quinn, about her memories while taking a road trip across the United States also inspired me. The title, "Where I live, This is What The Sky Looks Like" was a cluster of porcelain clouds suspended from the gallery ceiling, each delicately attached to strings linked to puddles of blue glaze placed on the floor. The title enhances the installation in its simple, poetic statement. The strings, which had hundreds of minute droplets of glaze tied to them, represented the falling rain. The lights in the gallery were positioned directly above the clouds, and caused them to cast shadows throughout the space.

Appropriately, "Duchamp's line about titles being the artwork's 'invisible colors' is perfect, because in assigning a title you have the opportunity to extend the work."<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 6 "Where I Live, This is What the Sky Looks Like", Jeanne Quinn, 2003**

Quinn captures the everyday occurrence, often overlooked, in an enlightened and stunning way. I appreciate the deliberate, unspoiled, yet insightful innocence the title evokes. She describes her work in these words:

Porcelain is a substance; it is as immutable and unchanging as any material. It is also made up of dust and water. In making porcelain clouds, I have tried to create an absurd object that may be a metaphor for the permanence of the ephemeral. -Jeanne Quinn<sup>7</sup>

Throughout my research and observation of other artists and their works, I have discovered that in order to create something meaningful, it is necessary to bring one's own life's journey into the work. The artist must show how the world is experienced through his or her eyes alone.

## PROCESS & TECHNICAL INFORMATION

As I entered my thesis year, I needed to design the layout and determine my method of operating for the proposed final body of work. I used the skills I had previously learned while in undergraduate to guide the work while still experimenting along the way. The initial concept for the thesis body changed and transformed as I discovered new techniques and approaches toward the clay. My original proposal focused on the garden as a wall installation. However, as I moved further into the work, it became more abstract and less specific to the garden. The forms I constructed became increasingly reminiscent of the foliage indigenous to the farm I call home. The sense of the piece was that of delicate vegetative forms with quiet hints of muted colors. There was a strong feminine quality in the work with delicate folds and graceful lines.

Soon after establishing the proposal, I secured a site for the thesis exhibition in the Kunstler Gallery at Booksmart Studio. Located off-campus, in the historic district of Rochester, New York the gallery was an ideal setting for a large-scale wall installation. The space had wooden flooring, a high ceiling, and was separated by a partition wall. There was a flow to the room with the entrance beginning at one end and exiting at the other. I selected a particular wall with the dimensions eight feet high and thirty-two feet long. After designing the overall look of the gallery space, I began sketching the plans for the composition and was

advised to work out my ideas on a reduced scale.

I constructed a paper maquette of the gallery space to plot different options for the overall arrangement of the work. Using black construction paper, I cut out various designs to represent the areas contained by the porcelain pieces. This task helped me visualize the format in a much more manageable way. I was able to quickly work through ideas for the layout and immediately eliminate those that were less successful.

I constructed the porcelain elements by rolling out thin slabs of extremely soft clay. Using various patterns, I cut out the forms and carefully burnished the edges with strips of newspaper and refined the hard edges. I gave the pieces a subtle linear texture by using a hand broom made of coarse bristles. With the clay slab in one hand and the broom in the other, I swept the moist clay with one gentle motion. I then curled, twisted, folded and pinched the forms with my fingers. Due to the porcelain's composition, and its tendency to dry rapidly, required that I handle the material quickly. This was to my advantage because when I spent too much time thinking and overworking a piece it would collapse and become lifeless. I was deliberate in my movements yet I found the less I controlled the clay the more fluid and alive the pieces felt. This led me to explore other techniques as well.

I started purposefully throwing the soft forms in draped slings of fabric and roughly cut pieces of foam. The forms were becoming increasingly free from my

hands and I was pleased with the unexpected results. I invited the unpredictable effects of gravity onto the material.

I specifically chose porcelain as the medium for several reasons. The translucency of the porcelain created a warm glow and lent a soft elegance within the pieces. There is also a vulnerability to the material, which exposed its virtues as well as its imperfections. I also tested a variety high fire glazes, which I narrowed down to five that worked well with the porcelain. I incorporated two flashing slips that would create halos of orange color when interacting with the materials in the reduction firing. Lastly, at the very end of each firing I would spray soda bicarbonate into the kiln. By introducing this material to the atmosphere of the kiln, it would coat the exposed surfaces of the work and give the porcelain a subtle glisten.

While making and firing the pieces, I was still searching and testing options for efficiently attaching the hundreds of clay forms to the wall in the gallery. I tried hanging the pieces on nails driven into drywall, however this proved unstable. I experimented by filling in the holes of each form with rubber caulking, allowing for a tighter hold when placed over the nail. This was an improvement but still not the solution I needed for this piece. I was not satisfied and began contemplating other options, such as using Velcro, adhesives, and lastly magnets.

The magnets were the best solution when I discovered how strong they could be and how easy it was to rotate the pieces on the surface of the wall. I

ordered various sizes and strengths of magnets in the form of rods and discs. The strongest magnets were able to hold as much as twenty-five pounds. I then covered the walls in my studio with thin sheets of galvanized steel to test my idea and to see if the pieces would hold. The metal I used came in sheets of four feet by eight feet requiring a total of eight sheets to fill the gallery wall.

The panels of metal were relatively lightweight and easily adhered to the wall surface. The lighting was logistically arranged to enhance the translucency of the pieces, which created dramatic shadowing in the gallery.

With all of the components of the wall piece in my studio, I was able to freely design and place the forms easily as I worked. I bonded the magnets to the porcelain forms with two-part epoxy glue, which dried as hard as the porcelain itself. The studio space became a factory with specific sections for making, storing, gluing and installing the pieces.



**Figure 7 Detail of my studio space, 2009**

## CLAY, GLAZES, AND SLIPS

### Val Cushing Cone 10 Porcelain

Grolleg	55
Kona F-4	20
Silica	12
Pyrax	13
Macaloid	2

### Ice

G-200	80
Whiting	7
Silica	7
Wood Ash	6
+ Yellow Ochre	2%

### Butterbean

NOT FOR FOOD SURFACES!

G-200	53
Titanium Dioxide	8
Whiting	8
Barium Carbonate	21
OM4 Ball Clay	10

### Spodumene

Custer Feldspar	21
Dolomite	24
Spodumene	30
Silica	12
EPK	9
Zircopax	5
Gerstley Borate	4

### Hamada Strontium Base

Strontium Carbonate	22.5
Whiting	10.9
Kona F-4	65.3
OM4 Ball Clay	1.3

### Vertigo Base

Bone Ash	2.0
Dolomite	18.8
Talc	1.3
Whiting	6.5
Custer Feldspar	9.6
Nepheline Syenite	20.0
EPK	25.0
Silica	16.8

### Avery Flashing Slip

Avery	70
Nepheline Syenite	30

### Flashing Slip

Nepheline Syenite	10
Avery	80
XX Sagger	10

## FLEETING

Over the course of several months, the porcelain elements and the final decisions for the composition of the wall piece slowly came together as the deadline for the thesis show neared. Once inside the gallery space, I began installing the galvanized steel panels. I took great care to cover the gaps where the panels joined and the wall eventually appeared seamless.

Immediately following the installation of the metal, I then painted the steel a warm gray color that created a subdued feeling in the room. My intention was to focus the viewer's eye on the porcelain pieces and the wall would be the backdrop for the interesting shadows at play. I attached all of the porcelain pieces according to the preconceived design until it was complete and the work came together as planned.

The finishing touch was the placement of a long and narrow wooden bench opposite the wall with all the porcelain pieces. This was an invitation for the viewers to sit and observe the work; a quiet place where one could reflect upon the installation.

As I sat viewing the work before me, I experienced a certain inherent grace as the porcelain floated across the wall. I recalled the motions of my hands forming the clay, each ripple and fold imprinting the surface of the work. The wall represented natural elements and, in turn, one echo of "home" for me.



When Martin Heidegger wrote “The Origin of the Work of Art” he addressed the concept of a “thing’s” being, which in turn becomes the essence of the artwork. His essay on how an object becomes a work of art has greatly influenced my perception toward of the meaning of art.

. . .it is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing's general essence. -Martin Heidegger<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger, using the example of Van Gogh’s painting of a peasant woman’s shoes explains that the painting reveals a pair of worn and tattered leather shoes, shoestrings unraveled and broken, that belonged to an anonymous woman who went to the fields day after day. More than just mere documentation or reproduction of footwear, the painting is an expression of grueling labor experienced by the woman who wears them. Van Gogh captured the *essence* of her way of life. Heidegger believes that Van Gogh has taken an inanimate object, a “thing” and exposed its being, transcending what it physically is and therefore creating a work of art. Through the work process of art, Heidegger says, the artist ultimately inaugurates what was until then not there at all, namely the unconcealment of being.

With regard to my own work, the thesis created a precious memento of a moment in time, the fleeting. The vision I had in my mind’s eye for the wall piece represented an isolated place, where everything changes and migrates over time, as

on the plains of Nebraska where I recall the wind moving through the fields,  
imprinting its very nature which has now become the essence of "Fleeting."

## CONCLUSION

I am quite fortunate for the lessons learned as well as the people I have met during my time in graduate school. I have a stronger sense of purpose and direction in my actions towards making art. Prior to my graduate experience, I had primarily a functional background in making. This was a place of great comfort and understanding. However, I am pleased with my decision to try something new for my final thesis work. This was an important time to explore ideas, make mistakes and then learn from them. I did not want to rely on what I was already confident in doing but I wanted to branch out and expose myself to possibly being uncomfortable, struggling through the learning process.

In these last two years, I have opened myself up to an overwhelming amount of information, trying to absorb every opportunity and suggestion that was given. Upon reflection, I see that this was in many ways a hindrance to my progression as an artist. I now discern more clearly in guiding what I let in as my influence and what I choose to discard.

Robert Irwin addressed this thought in an interview about how he carefully gathers his inspiration and information.

..... I hold it (ideas) all in a state of suspense while I examine it before I select what I will let into my life. Because for me, ideas are very potent elements that can radically change your life. Nothing is the same once you accept an idea, and you can never return to the place you left. So I proceed very cautiously in the realm of ideas and information. -Robert Irwin<sup>9</sup>

I realize that with each day I am in my studio, with each bit of new information I choose to absorb, the journey to find my own voice as an artist advances. Graduate school has significantly accelerated my journey and for that I am deeply grateful.



Fleeing. Porcelain, magnets, and steel, 8 feet x 35 feet





Fleeting, Detail











## ENDNOTES

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